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Bulletin of the City Art Museum of St. Louis

A JAPANESE LACQUER
WRITING BOX

A WRITING BOX (*suzuri-bako*) in lacquer is not least among the objects that have been added to the Japanese section of the Museum.

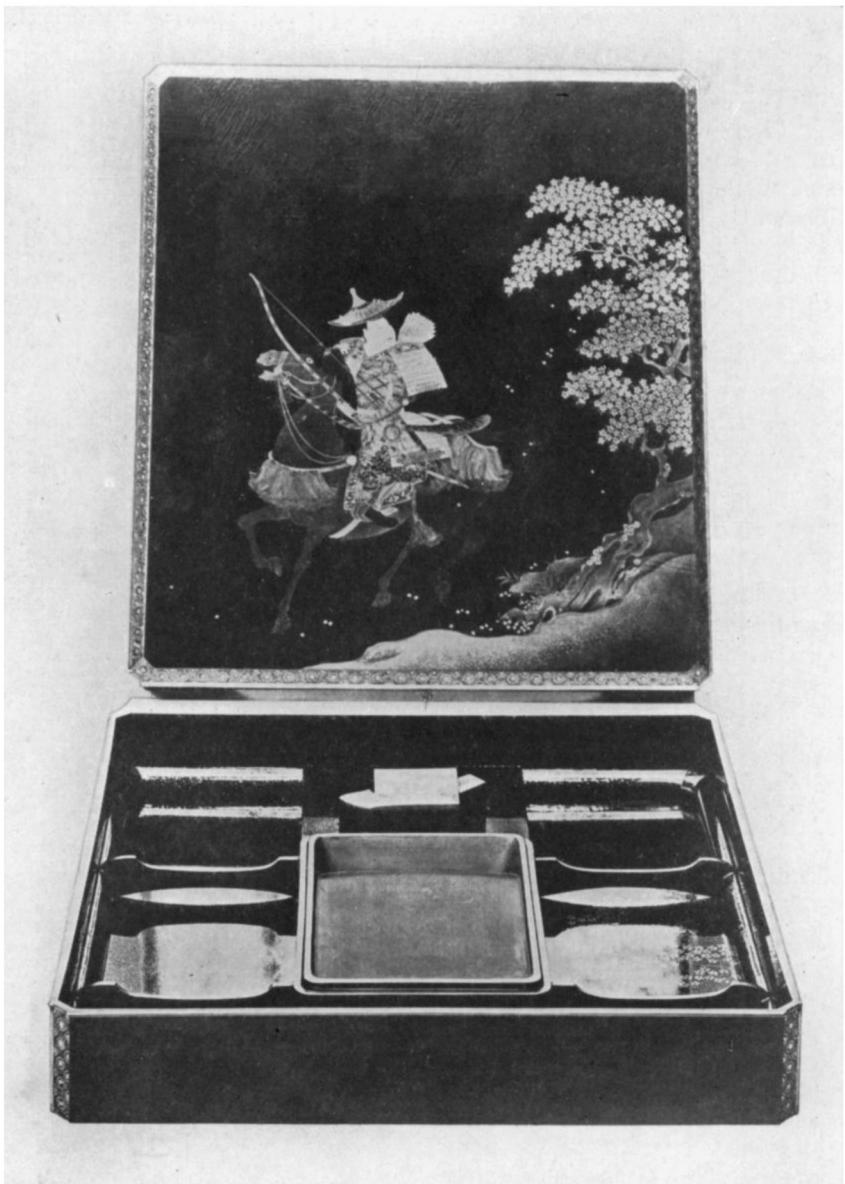
It is in the usual square flat form, with the angles cut off and depressed, and shows in all its details an interest in making this particular box a distinctly personal piece of work. Whether a single individual was responsible for both outside and inside decoration of the box does not appear, but the motif of the cover supplies the scheme of decoration for all other parts.

A horseman in armor, carrying a bow, turns to look at a cherry tree in bloom the petals from which are flying in the wind. The pose of the man is very animated and expressive as he turns in the saddle; the horse reined back throws up his head and switches his tail in a spirited manner. In a mirror background the gold and colors of the lacquer artist, maki-ye-shi, are laid with the most perfect decision and delicacy of touch; in carrying out the effect all the resources of the craft, save those of modeling and carving, have been called upon; the silver whiteness of the man's face, the dry powdery quality of the horse's hide, the red of the accoutrements, especially the gold of the armor where broad metal surfaces and finest lines are exquisitely laid; there is even a separate decoration of awabi shell inlay on the saddle cloth. The blossoms of the tree are of bright gold in the slightest perceptible relief and distinguished from the dusted surface of the tree trunk and ground, while the immediate foreground is a mosaic of gold squares and dots (*hirakane*).

The detached petals in bright gold flying past the horseman are relieved against the dry surface of the dark horse's flank and flutter to the dusty ground in front of him, not in profusion but with a right perception of their value in the poem or legend illustrated and their place in the composition. In the several compartments of the box we see a portion of the tree in blossom and the flying petals, the dusted surface of the ground, the mosaic of gold squares and dots, and what appears to be a snow storm of irregular gold flakes of varying density, reproducing the erratic effect of a spring snow squall, sudden but brief. On the narrow sides of the cover the blossoms and ground are continued, and a narrow band of a pattern in diaper (*ishime*) in gold and awabi fills the beveled edges and cut off corners.

In this piece we have, handled in the best manner, a distinctively Japanese art in which most of the many methods of makiye-shi (picture lacquer) are represented; togidashi or "polished out" surface, heijin or flat powder, kin-ji or fine powder, hirakane or kirikane the gold mosaic, and raden or shell inlay in addition to color maki-ye.

Articles in lacquer when considered apart from their specific purpose are usually classed after the method employed in decoration, which is obvious and safe, after the school or place where they were made, and finally, if one is so fortunate as to know, by the name of the artist. In the classification according to school the expert is safe; for we are told by Mr. Ernest Hart of the Japan Society of London, to whose study of the subject the lover of lacquer-work is greatly indebted, that the maki-ye-shi was not permitted to change his profession and was officially commanded to train students to succeed him.



LACQUER WRITING BOX

JAPANESE, XVII-XVIII CENTURY

Bulletin of the City Art Museum of St. Louis

The difference between really good lacquer-work and that of inferior quality is not often appreciated by western peoples; if pictorial standards had little to do with the question there would still be the standard of the craft of the nuri-mono-shi in whose hands is the "forwarding" so to speak, of the structure on which the artist maki-ye-shi is to give the pictorial value to the work; this "forwarding" in the old more leisurely periods differed greatly from later, more commercially impelled ones.

With us, no doubt, prepared lacquer would be sold by the pound without regard to the diverse qualities of the sap which must be considered by artist and artisan in the effects they both wish to produce; for lacquer, we are told, varies in qualities according to the age of the tree from which it comes, and varies in the different parts of the tree; that from the branch hardening more slowly and with greater hardness than that from the trunk; and lastly, that the final coating, suki urushi, must be, or should be, made from the sap from the oldest trees.

The temptation to hasten the hardening of the several grounds by artificial means is one to which the modern artisan and artist often yield under commercial pressure, and the test, sustained by the old work, of hot liquids, alcohol and acids, is usually too much for modern lacquer. Among the reasons for general use of this material were, its permanent character, the precision with which joints and covers could be made to meet and the consequent almost air tight compartments for medicines and scents provided, to weather tight and water tight virtues, and finally its adaptability to decorative use in the hands of a tasteful and patient people.

C. P. D.

A PAINTING BY FRANK DUVENECK

IT seldom happens that an artist is given due credit or is appreciated by his contemporaries throughout his entire career. In reading the lives of the great painters, one is impressed with their struggles for recognition. Some few have had the good fortune to live to see their work,—once disliked and rejected,—appreciated and purchased at prices not dreamed of in their early life; but these are rare exceptions.

Frank Duveneck was an exception. From the very beginning of his career his work received the highest praise both from his fellow artists and the critics. His first exhibition, held in Boston, in 1875, to quote one of his biographers, "proved more than a success, coming near a sensation." From that time down to the present day the works of Duveneck have been sought after by collectors and museums, and it is a lamented fact that there are not enough to supply the demand. The question may arise in the minds of those not familiar with his work as to the cause of this continued and almost universal popularity. The answer is the same were it asked of Rembrandt, Hals or any of the great masters. They were concerned with the representation of Life. They had discovered the secret of great art and went to their work in the most simple and direct manner. They were not concerned with technique or color except as a means to an end.

Duveneck studied the works of these masters, not to imitate their style, but to discover the secret of their power. His early training in Munich under his German masters was thorough with emphasis upon good draftsmanship and the correct estimation of values, and the road to success was not an easy one. It was